

To: Connecticut General Assembly  
Legislative Program Review and Investigations Committee

From: Margot Burns, Environmental Planner  
Lower Ct River Valley Council of Governments

Date: March 3, 2014

RE: H.B. 5369 and H.B. 5370

My name is Margot Burns, Environmental Planner and Coordinator of the Lower Ct River and Coastal Region Land Trust Exchange at the Lower CT River Valley Council of Governments (RiverCOG). The RiverCOG brings together local governments and others to coordinate land use planning and services on a regional basis. I am testifying in favor of both Bill 5370 and Bill 5369.

An important part of our Region's economy is based upon our tourism, outdoor recreational and natural resource assets, many of which are part of our State Parks and Forests system. They include Devils Hopyard State Park; Wadsworth Falls State Park; Chatfield Hollow State Park; Gillette Castle State Park; Haddam Meadows State Park; Machimoodus State Park; Hurd State Park; George D. Seymour State Park Scenic Preserve; Airline State Park Trail; Selden Neck State Park; Beckett Hill State Park Scenic Reserve; Cockaponset, Nehantic, and Meshomasic State Forests; and abutting the region at both its southwest and southeast corners, and acting like bookends supporting the other recreational and tourism assets of the Region, are Hammonasset Beach State Park, located in Madison, and Rocky Neck State Park, located in East Lyme. They provide our Region's residents and visitors beautiful places to swim, hunt, fish, canoe and kayak, hike, bike, bird watch, picnic, and hold public events. For our parks and forests to be strong economic and environmental drivers they must be safe, clean, managed, and cared for.

Although I grew up in this State and Region, and have hiked our parks trails and swam at our parks beaches, and always felt safe doing so, I regret to say that at times I no longer feel that way. A visit to a state park beach this summer on a crowded Saturday afternoon left me wondering where the life guards were and why I had to pay so much to park my car. I didn't go back. A recent hike through one of our state forests with my son left me heartbroken to see trails that were in poor condition and had areas of trash, illicit camp fires, and broken bottles. I haven't been back there either.

Ensuring quality of life, recreational amenities, educational opportunities, and a clean and working environment are part of all economic strategies. Our State's parks and forests should be fully involved in building a stronger CT. They will not be able to do that unless they are fully funded and allowed to help themselves through the ingenuity and creativity of their managers and should be able to retain the revenue they create. Right now we have only 17 park supervisors and 53 maintainers for 107 State Parks. By 2020, based upon retirement eligibility, that number will fall to 4 supervisors and 29 maintainers. Even if one in 5 positions is refilled, the Parks Division will at most, be left with a total of 40 persons servicing 8 million patrons each year. The experienced staff of our parks and forests is our greatest asset in realizing the full potential of our park system both economically and environmentally but we need many more of them to adequately care for and provide our parks greatest benefits to the citizens of the State.

Thank you.